The Road to Emmaus
Luke 24:13-32
April 18, 1971
John M. Buchanan

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ, celebrated last Sunday, cannot be confined to a one-day observation. The early Christian Church acknowledged it and moved the day of corporate worship from the Sabbath -- sundown Friday till sundown Saturday -- to Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of Resurrection. The intent was that whenever Christians gather to worship, they should do so out of their sense that the Lord Jesus Christ is alive, and that this fact is the most important element of their gathering.

And yet, in a very real sense, things are not that way at all. By making so much of Easter Sunday we diminish the significance of the Resurrection on every other Sunday. By tying the celebration of Christ's resurrection to our culture's annual "Rite of Spring" we, in fact, sever the connecting link between the central Christian event, and the whole experience of the Church. The fact that there were approximately 150% more people here last Sunday than on any other given Sunday of the year ought to tell us something.

So on this day which is traditionally an areligious day for the church; on this day when ministers usually feel empty, having turned it all on for Lent and Holy Week, I would direct your attention back to the Resurrection, and to a consideration of the idea that the world is a different place, and every moment of every day is essentially different, because of what we celebrated one week ago.

In classic terms the Resurrection means that Jesus Christ defeated the powers of death, evil and sin; that we are safe from the power of death and free from the power of sin, and that human life may be lived in an environment of essential hopefulness. That is what most Easter sermons are about, including the one preached from this pulpit.

But the Resurrection also means that this Jesus Christ who was dead is alive: that he is present in the life of the world, and that obviously, is

a very difficult doctrine. It is one thing to celebrate something which took place 2,000 years ago. It is another thing to extend the celebration into a contemporary reality with which I must deal in every day of my life.

Now, let's pause for a moment and do some clarifying. Sometimes we have difficulty with the traditional language of our faith. Words which once had great significance tend to lose content over the years; and often we find ourselves using words without the foggiest notion what they mean. Put another way, we use the words without knowing what identifiable, human experiences they are meant to describe. Well, when the phrases "the Risen Christ," "The Presence of God", and "The Holy Spirit" are used, my interpretation is that we are talking about the same, single human experience. Not three separate phenomena, but the single experience that the reality we know as God is strangely available to us.

That doctrine, and it derives from our belief in the Resurrection, is very important. It means, for instance, that we do not live in an abandoned world but a world that is constantly being invaded by God himself. It means that God the creator is not a clock-maker type who got everything going in the beginning, but who has since been back in some corner of the universe observing it run-down. Rather he is a participant in the unfolding of creation: he is party to everything that happens, and his creating is still going on.

Those ideas are very important to the Christian Faith, and yet I sense that they are not too important for most Presbyterians. Fancy, provocative theology - but not practical reality. Good sermon material, but not the kind of idea that has relevance in the office, plant or classroom.

The Pentecostals seem to be pretty sure of the divine presence, but they've got their own private vocabulary, and their own esoteric, mystical experiences, all of which is a bit bewildering to the average Presbyterian. Yet they seem to be pretty positive when they talk about an experience with

Jesus Christ - and not many Presbyterians are.

Likewise the very pious, the nun in the cloister, the monk in the monastery, the clergyman given to much prayer and reflection, seem to have a hold of God's presence in the daily round in a way most of us do not.

And in those observations - that I would suggest reflect the Presbyterian mentality - namely, that any experience of the reality of Jesus Christ depends on traumatic, emotional upheavals, or the glib use of all the properly pious phrases, or a life of quiet devotion walled off from all the rest, - in that is a piviotal theological assumption. It is that God dwells only in special places, and comes to special people only, and that any personal religious experience must be marked by strange and unique behavior, words and life style. At which point we have left entirely the good news of the Gospel. It sounds, in fact, like that old Greek idea that there are two realms - the worldly and the spiritual, totally apart; that a man could move in and out of each of them at his discretion; that most people spend most of the time dealing with the worldly, with an occasional foray into the spiritual.

That is not a Christian idea. The Good News is that there is no longer an easy distinction between the worldly and the spiritual: there are no longer holy places as opposed to worldly places, but that because God came into the life of the world in Jesus Christ everything is now both holy and worldly - all experiences, all relationships, all activity, all of time. God is present in the <u>common</u> life of the world. That is what it means to believe in a resurrected Christ. And I think that is what comes through the little post-resurrection story I read this morning from Luke's Gospel.

Let's reconstruct it. Sunday would have been the worst day of all. Saturday - an ambiguous, nothing kind of day. A poet once observed "After great pain a formal feeling comes." [Frederick Buechner, <u>The Magnificent Defeat</u>, p. 83] We know a little bit about that. Whenever tragedy strikes

close to home we suddenly become very formal. It's one of the ways we protect ourselves from the full impact of what has happened, and most people are glad for the little rituals we adopt in time of tragedy for this reason. Saturday would have been that kind of day for his friends and disciples. Little by little they were confronting the terrible thing that had happened. I can see them doing a lot of pacing back and forth in their little locked room, trying to make conversation, being a bit more solicitious than usual. But the formality does not last long. Life has to go on somehow, even though it is now different. The day after a funeral is always hard for us because all the formality is gone and it is time to face the implications of what happened.

Sunday was that kind of day, the hardest of all. For the Jews, Sunday was like our Monday - the first day of the week. For Jerusalem it was the morning after the Passover. Life's cycle was beginning again: everything was returning to normal.

So it was that two of them did the only thing that made sense. To be sure, a few hysterical women had claimed that the tomb was empty. But it was only a rumor. And rather than spend the day in Jerusalem two of them decided to go to Emmaus. Now Emmaus is just a few miles outside of Jerusalem; there appears to have been nothing much there, and it seems that the only thing Emmanus had going for it was the fact that it wasn't Jerusalem. They were, that is to say, indulging in a little normal, predictable escapism, which under the same conditions we would have done as well.

As they walked along the road they were joined by a third man with whom they talked, and to whom they ventilated some of their feelings about the tragic events of Thursday and Friday. They talked about it some, and the stranger referred them to those Old Testament passages which describe the Messiah in terms of suffering and death. When they had arrived at Emmaus they persuaded him to stay with them for the evening meal. When he broke

bread, blessed it and gave it to them, they recognized who it was. It was Jesus - he was alive and in their midst. Then he left them. As quickly as he had come he vanished.

What do you make of that? As is the case with the resurrection itself, no one was there getting it all on video tape. Presumably the story was told by the two men who experienced, preserved by the church until Luke wrote it down. We aren't going to know for sure what happened to these two men - except that in the middle of the journey to Emmaus they had an experience that convinced them that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead.

I think there are two very important things we can learn from the story, however. The first is that the divine presence in life - called the Living God, the Risen Christ or the Holy Spirit - is not confined to those special times and places we usually regard as spiritual or holy. There is, in all the resurrection stories an element of the common, the everyday. His birth was heralded by an angel choir and kings bearing gifts. But this event happened in the undramatic, unspectacular context of life: Mary in the garden mistaking him for the gardner, Thomas hiding out in a locked house, Peter taking his boat out to fish at night time, and now these two - walking down a dusty road and breaking bread together. There is nothing much dramatic, or unearthly or other worldly about it. The Gospel writers clearly wanted the readers to understand the resurrection is experienced in the common things of life.

Well, that's pretty significant, if it is true. It means, for instance, that the sacred moments are often the everyday moments: and the holy places, just common places: and the truly religious experiences in which one feels full of the love and presence of God, are not confined to the church building - but are the places where we spend most of our time.

William Stringfellow put it this way: "It is this world, the world we know, the world just as it is into which God comes, for which God cares, in

which God is with us . . ." [p. 62, A Private and Public Faith] And later, "Now I am sure of the Resurrection . . . It is not just some long ago event. It is at once long ago and here and now . . . . It is no myth . . . . It is no abstract philosophic proposition . . . It is no self-induced positive thought . . . . but the disclosure of the vitality of God in this world." [p. 71]

A group of young people from Lafayette were in Washington D. C. last weekend. And on Easter Sunday they worshipped in the National Cathedral - an awesome and beautiful building. Some of them went forward to receive communion - walked down the long aisle to the ornate chancel. One person who did not go forward said they acted when they came back as if they had seen God. That's understandable human experience. But the story of the Road to Emmanus suggests that God is equally present in the crime ridden, dirty streets of Washington, as he is at the Altar of the National Cathedral. It suggests to me that we may have trouble perceiving the Risen Christ because we look too high when in fact he walks with us along dusty roads, and comes to us as we sit to break bread together.

The story also suggests that it does little good to try to escape him. I said earlier that we know a little bit about the art of escapism. Perhaps we simply go to the movies to get away from it all. Or perhaps a few cocktails give us that blessed relief from stress and strain. Or perhaps we fill our lives with busyness to avoid confronting the fact that nothing has much meaning and we're getting nowhere fast. The story of the road to Emmaus means that Jesus Christ comes to us particularly as we try to escape; that he pursues us even as we try to get away from him; that there is nowhere in life we can go that is away from his presence.

That's important because I think at the heart of the religious mood today is this old and mistaken idea that we can keep life neatly compartmentalized: that the religious person is a different if not eccentric person: that the presence of God - if it is real at all - is available and recognizable

to only those who devote their lives to being "religious".

The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that he is not dead but alive: that your life and my life are the arenas of his presence: that he does walk with us: that he is always out there, deeply involved in the life of the world.

May we become increasingly sensitive to that. May every Sunday be the day of resurrection. May every day be lived in communion with the one who keeps coming into our midst.

Amen.

Our father, give us ears to hear your word as it comes through the loud voices of the world. Give us eyes to see your presence in the lives we lead. Give us hearts responsive when you come to us in a stranger, a friend, a loved one. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.